WORLD CITIES DAY

A manifesto for Bangladesh's future cities

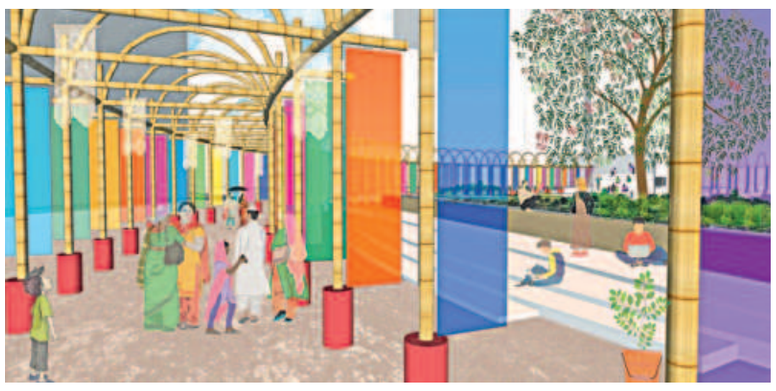
KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

In Dhaka, we live and work in the densest city on the planet. Day by day, we are making it more unliveable and unbearable. Every year, rather ingloriously, we are awarded some regrettable labels. And the show goes on.

The current crisis in Dhaka is the product of three failures: a lack of vision among national policymakers, poor planning by planners, and even poorer management by city managers. Dhaka's fate is repeated in other cities and towns across the country. Every town wants to be a mini Dhaka. The narrative needs to change. We need to develop a fresh vision of what we want our cities to be.

For too long, the discourse on our cities has been dominated by economic, statistical or technocratic parameters. Useful only for managing the techno-functional aspects of cities, such parameters limit our understanding of the city's fullest human, social, aesthetic and ecological potential. In approaching the future city, we need to embrace a more proactive and positive notion of the city. We need to consider the city as a cultural and existential form, an essential human innovation in how we should live together. I have argued that such an idea is best represented by the term "urbanism", rather than urbanisation.

On a number of occasions, in this newspaper and elsewhere, I have described what urbanism may mean for Bangladesh and tried to map out



Gulshan Circle reimagined as a pop-up public space.

a future for our cities on that basis. In 2012, I presented my ideas in the book Designing Dhaka: A Manifesto for a Better City and delineated further ideas for Dhaka and other cities in numerous articles and features. At the risk of repeating some topics, I list them here in summary form.

Water is foundational. An urbanism for Bangladesh has to be conceptualised from the hydrological characteristics of the delta. For a while now, I have argued for an obvious but largely ignored idea: that water intelligence should be the basis for developing our cities. Most conventional planning considers the city from a high and dry vantage point. I call this "dry planning": the city is considered civilised if it is dry, even if that creates inequity in the allocation of resources and a class distinction between those who are dry and those who are wet. In this scenario, what is wet is seen as primitive and backward. The outcome: water, as the basis of a rich, environmentally attuned life, has evaporated. The river has become a dirty drain. The wetland has become a swamp. And the monsoon has become just a miserable season.

Planning around land and water, rather than land versus water, should be the natural recourse in our deltaic landscape. A Bengali urbanism can show that this historic opposition can be overcome. An audacious vision for such cities has to begin with the precious landscape of waterways, wetlands and agricultural terrain, which forms the natural foundation of our nation-state. Such a vision can integrate urbanism, hydrology, agriculture, infrastructure and flooding into a new city form.

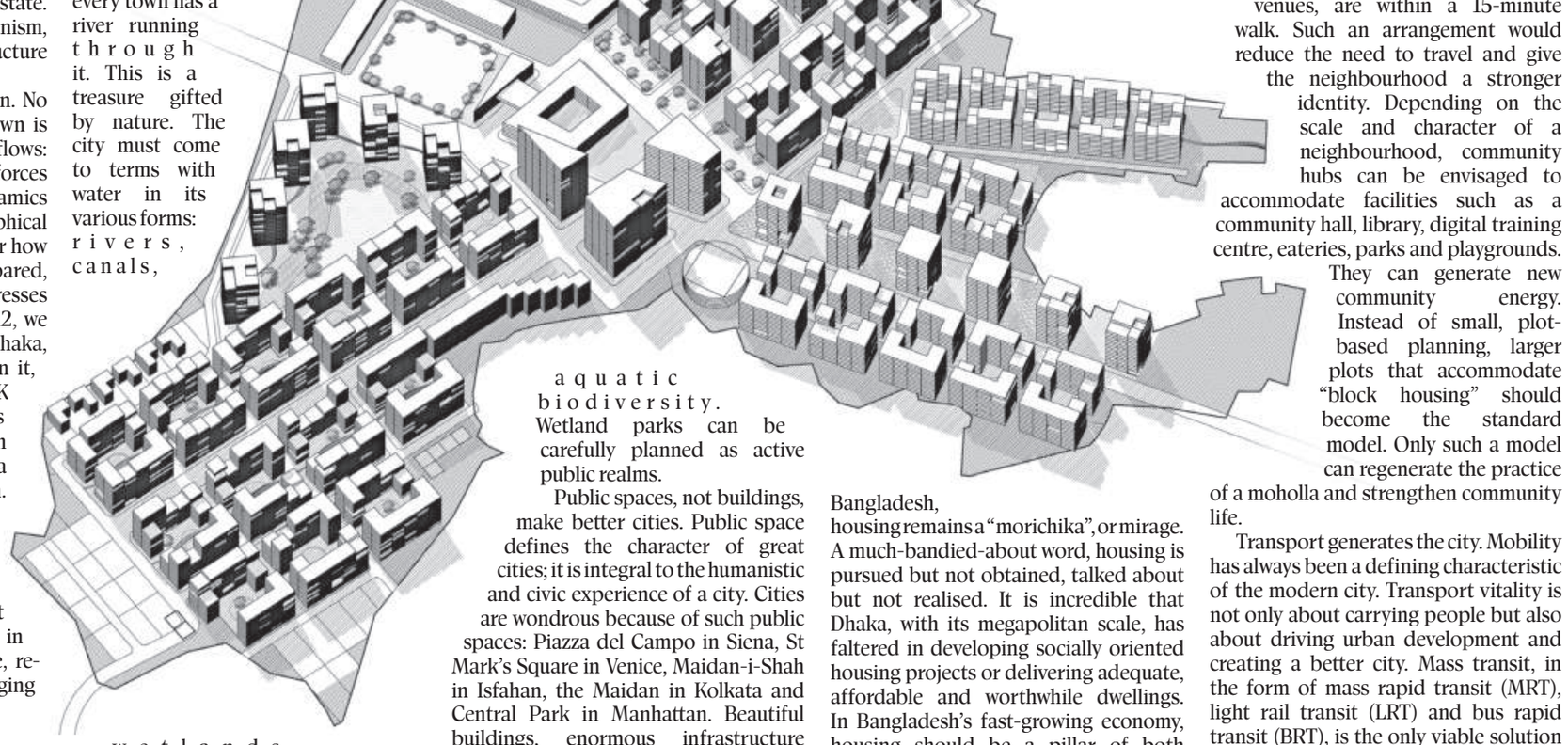
Every city needs a regional plan. No town is an island. Each city or town is intimately linked to a network of flows: of people, information, economic forces and, above all, hydrological dynamics that extend beyond the geographical boundaries of that town. No matter how carefully a plan for a city is prepared, it remains limited unless it addresses the larger regional context. In 2012, we proposed a regional plan for Dhaka, which we called "Dhaka Nexus". In it, a metropolitan core (the RAJUK area) and satellite settlements (extending to Kaliakoir in the north and Mawa in the south) create a planned polycentric constellation. This development depends on the urban intensification of the satellite towns around Dhaka and the development of a multimodal transport system. We envisage that the arrangement will be effective in de-centring the metropolitan core, re-clustering urban centres and managing their population density.

The five-million city. The future of Dhaka lies outside Dhaka. A consolidated national plan is required to manage the wild urbanisation that defines the current situation. We need to configure settlement patterns carefully, as they create a footprint that disrupts agricultural land (affecting food security), as well as wetlands and floodplains (harming ecological conditions and biodiversity). Planned clustering and distribution of the future population will be essential for sustainable economic and social development. Through a process I call "distributed urbanism", Bangladesh can plan for "metro-cities" beyond Dhaka in anticipation of a growing national population. We can plan five "metro-hubs" with 5 million people each, 10 medium-sized cities with more than 1 million people each, and 40 smaller towns with 0.5 million people each. All of these hubs can be developed by intensifying existing towns. The footprint of a settlement depends on its population and density. For a future redistribution of the population, the metro-cities can have a density of 20,000 people per square kilometre, requiring a footprint of 250 sq km (for a total population of 5 million). The medium-sized and smaller cities can have densities of 10,000 and 8,000 people per sq km, with areas of 100 sq km and 60 sq km respectively.

Follow the flow. Bangladesh's urban reality is that almost every town has a river running through it. This is a treasure gifted by nature. The city must come to terms with water in its various forms: rivers, canals, wetlands, floodplains and ponds. What a beautiful city that would be! All physical planning should begin from the premise that a river constitutes a vast ecosystem, even when it runs through a city or town, and that rivers are defined by the flow of water. In fact, the flow and overflow behaviour of a river constitutes a "water basin" extending over a large area in which the city or town is embedded. All water flow in a city is part of the interconnected water-basin system, from river and canal flows to urban drainage and water supply, and from floodplain ecology to aquifer recharge.

Riverbanks are natural public realms. Rivers are central to the ecological and hydrological matrix, and riverbanks provide a natural setting for a rich public realm and social life. Developing riverbanks as public spaces should be our unconditional priority. The entire stretch of an urban riverbank should be declared a public realm, which could then be developed into open public spaces with parks, gardens and public facilities. Riverbanks are natural sites for tree planting; some can even accommodate mini urban forests. We need exemplary design language and guidelines for redeveloping our urban riverbanks.

Framing the floodplains. A city like Dhaka is surrounded by rich terraqueous floodplains and wetlands. There is a constant battle between the ecological obligation to preserve the floodplains and the opposing economic pressure for invasive development. Landfilling and the gradual disappearance of terraqueous zones characterise a ruthless pattern of development. A middle ground can be found. To safeguard urban floodplains, we have envisaged dedicated peripheral building development along the demarcated edges of the floodplains, while conserving the floodplains to accommodate flooding, help recharge aquifers and promote aquatic biodiversity. Wetland parks can be carefully planned as active public realms.



◀ **A vision of the city as an ensemble of housing blocks and towers.**

ILLUSTRATION: **BENGAL INSTITUTE**

Public spaces, not buildings, make better cities. Public space defines the character of great cities; it is integral to the humanistic and civic experience of a city. Cities are wondrous because of such public spaces: Piazza del Campo in Siena, St Mark's Square in Venice, Maidan-i-Shah in Isfahan, the Maidan in Kolkata and Central Park in Manhattan. Beautiful buildings, enormous infrastructure projects and swanky developments are perhaps signs of a city's economic clout, but public spaces are what make a city experiential and humane. Plazas, "chottors", parks, fields and tree-filled gardens signify the "commons" for all: they are living rooms that provide a stage for the city's life and energy. If a plan for Dhaka aspires to be socially inclusive and humanistic, it should begin by giving generous attention to creating public spaces at all scales, from the city to the neighbourhood and even to the corner of a street.

The city belongs to pedestrians. We need a pedestrian-rich street life that is safe for all, especially women



A model of block housing incorporating shared community spaces.

and children. Only walkability can ensure a liveable and endearing city. Well-planned public spaces encourage walkability in the city. No matter how motorised and technologically advanced we become, the city ultimately belongs to the pedestrian, the human being on the street. A love for the city develops from walking through its streets and alleys. It is through the accessibility, discoveries and experiences of walking through the city that one acquires a fondness for it, a feeling I call "metrophilia". The success of a mass transit system relies on a well-developed pedestrian network, as people need to walk to stations to catch trains or buses.

Housing is a social fabric. In Bangladesh, housing remains a "morichika", or mirage. A much-bandied-about word, housing is pursued but not obtained, talked about but not realised. It is incredible that Dhaka, with its megapolitan scale, has faltered in developing socially oriented housing projects or delivering adequate, affordable and worthwhile dwellings. In Bangladesh's fast-growing economy, housing should be a pillar of both economic stability and public well-being; it affects productivity and quality of life. We have lamented since the 1990s that creating plots and individual buildings in the name of planning residential areas does not make for the best city, either in terms of the efficient use of land or the creation of communities. We need diversified housing forms in all our cities and towns, catering to all economic groups. Building and dwelling types, and their arrangement, create neighbourhoods and communities. The architecture of housing is not about "looks" but about how the spaces within housing units and the spaces that make up the public domain are knitted



A housing design that integrates shared social spaces to foster community life.

together into a harmonious fabric and eventually linked to the larger urban structure. It is this set of relationships that shapes the community spirit.

We need new neighbourhood forms. A sense of neighbourhood has historically defined the social cohesion of cities and contributed to the diversity of urban forms. In Dhaka, the original sense of a moholla has diminished because of the relentless drive towards plot-based apartment buildings and an increasing lack of shared facilities that strengthen community cohesion. The former mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, has championed the idea of a "15-minute city", in which key neighbourhood facilities, from schools and clinics to businesses and entertainment venues, are within a 15-minute walk. Such an arrangement would reduce the need to travel and give the neighbourhood a stronger identity. Depending on the scale and character of a neighbourhood, community hubs can be envisaged to accommodate facilities such as a community hall, library, digital training centre, eateries, parks and playgrounds. They can generate new community energy. Instead of small, plot-based planning, larger plots that accommodate "block housing" should become the standard model. Only such a model can regenerate the practice of a moholla and strengthen community life.

Transport generates the city. Mobility has always been a defining characteristic of the modern city. Transport vitality is not only about carrying people but also about driving urban development and creating a better city. Mass transit, in the form of mass rapid transit (MRT), light rail transit (LRT) and bus rapid transit (BRT), is the only viable solution to transport challenges, especially in a rapidly developing city such as Dhaka. Urban transport systems should be publicly oriented, designed for mass use and multimodal. No amount of investment in car-based infrastructure, such as widened streets, elevated roads and flyovers, will help resolve the crisis. While metropolitan cities need a comprehensive plan linking road, rail and river transport, smaller towns could plan ahead for mass transport systems such as LRT. Because any transit system is a driver of a city's development trajectory, stations along transport lines should be planned as new urban hubs with significant civic and commercial implications.

Small towns have a big future. Cities and towns can be diverse in nature and scale. We need a new vocabulary to understand the physiology and psychology of small towns before imposing development interventions. We need to acknowledge that a small town is not a miniature version of a big city; it has its own ontology. In generating new incentives for small towns, the first thing to understand is the scale of things: the clusters of buildings, their shapes and materiality, the character of streets and the overall quality of life. A small town is also an ecology; its footprint maintains a careful balance with the regional landscape of agriculture, floodplains and wetlands. The much-vaunted "green", a closeness to "nature" in the form of paddy fields or ribbons of rivers, can literally be glimpsed from one's window in such places. Specific rituals and festivals, artistic crafts, the production of various savouries, and musical or literary traditions give each town its distinct identity.

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The riverbank envisioned as an ecological and social spine of the city.

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